

Dear Secondary School Student Program Sponsor,

The Department understands that the COVID-19 situation has caused a major disruption in program participation.

As noted during the March 27, 2020 sponsor phone call, if you make responsible decisions that keep the exchange visitors' health, safety, and welfare, as well as U.S. national security and foreign policy implications, at the forefront of your decision-making, then you can expect the Department's support. Sponsors should document all unique circumstances and must continue to monitor exchange programs to ensure they meet program objectives to the fullest extent possible during this situation.

We would like to clarify and expand upon the guidance that has been shared through our FAQs (<https://i1visa.state.gov/covid-19/>) and the March 27, 2020 sponsor phone call. As a reminder, a sponsor should consider each situation carefully and make decisions based upon what best protects the health, safety, and welfare of the exchange visitor and the Americans with whom they interact. These temporary arrangements are only in effect due to COVID-19.

More than Two Exchange Students in a Host Family Home

Due to the COVID-19 situation, does a sponsor have the flexibility to place more than two exchange students (even if they speak the same language) in a fully vetted host family?

If the sponsor determines that returning to the home country would not be safe or feasible and this type of host family placement is the best way to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the exchange visitors, the sponsor may place more than two exchange visitors (even if they speak same language) with a single host family provided that the host family has the resources and is willing to host that number of exchange visitors.

Exchange Visitors Placed with Relatives in their Natural Family in the United States

Due to the COVID-19 situation, does a sponsor have the flexibility to place an exchange student with his or her relative as an emergency host family placement?

If the sponsor determines that returning to the home country would not be safe or feasible for the exchange student and this type of host family placement is the best way to protect health, safety, and welfare of that exchange visitor, the sponsor may place an exchange visitor with his or her relative provided that the sponsor secures the approval of the natural parents and still vets this host family placement to the greatest extent possible under the circumstances.

Payment to Host Families

Many host families are facing financial and health concerns and can no longer host exchange visitors. Is the Department allowing host families to be compensated financially in order to continue hosting and ensure the health, safety, and welfare of the exchange visitor?

If the sponsor determines that returning to the home country would not be safe or feasible for the exchange visitor, and that remaining with the current host family is the best way to protect the health, safety, and welfare of that exchange visitor, and that such is not possible without additional financial support to the family, the sponsor or the exchange visitor's natural family may decide to assist the host family financially so that they may continue hosting until the exchange visitor can return home safely.

Sponsors should document all such unique circumstances and must continue to monitor exchange programs to ensure they meet program objectives to the fullest extent possible during this situation. Sponsors must also closely monitor the health, safety, and welfare of each exchange visitor to determine if remaining on the exchange program is truly feasible.

Signing SSSP Exchange Visitors Off Program

Can a SSSP sponsor sign off the exchange visitor to a natural family member or non-relative in the U.S. if both the natural family and host family agree?

A sponsor can end an exchange visitor's program if the exchange visitor has returned home or if family members have taken the exchange visitor into their care and signed the visitor off the program as a legal guardian (the latter only if it is the best way to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the visitor). The exchange visitor would then have access to the 30-day grace period during which time he or she could make arrangements to return home or apply for a change of status through the Department of Homeland Security.

The Department has serious concerns about sponsors signing exchange visitors off the program to non-relatives. While we understand that this may ultimately become unavoidable in rare circumstances, we ask that sponsors seriously consider all other alternatives provided in this guidance before pursuing this option.

Waivers when Exchange Visitors Refuse to Return

I am a SSSP sponsor. I learned that other SSSP sponsors are requiring their exchange visitors' natural parents sign waivers for those exchange visitors who refuse to return home when a return flight is available. Some of the more problematic waivers note that the sponsor will not be able to provide support for the exchange visitor if the visitor continues to remain in the U.S. Does the current guidance allow for this?

The Department has serious concerns about sponsors asking natural parents to sign waivers if they choose to have their child remain in the U.S. despite an available return flight. While we understand that this may ultimately become unavoidable in rare circumstances, we ask that sponsors seriously consider all other alternatives provided in this guidance before pursuing this option.

Continuing the Secondary School Student Program in the Home Country

If an SSSP exchange visitor has returned to their home country and their U.S. high school is offering online classes, can the SSSP exchange visitor remain on program to

complete their academic year and program with the U.S. high school? If so, should I continue to have the student remain in ACTIVE status in SEVIS? What should I enter for their home address?

The sponsor must assess the situation, which may include utilizing alternative ways of maintaining program objectives in the face of school closures, such as online classes or home schooling. The Department notes that a temporary modification along these lines for exigent circumstances beyond a sponsor's or host school's control does not undermine a program's compliance with the regulations. In the present circumstances, the Department counts online classes toward a full course of study, even if the exchange visitor has left the United States and is taking online classes from elsewhere as long as it meets that host school's requirements to maintain academic status.

SEVIS is not intended to monitor an exchange visitor in a foreign country. The sponsor cannot update the Current U.S. Address, meant to represent the home address, with the exchange visitor's foreign address. For this specific scenario, the SEVIS record can remain in Active status with no address change.

Sincerely,

Office of Private Sector Exchange